Megan van Hamersveld

Schwartz

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*Whispering in the Giant’s Ear* by William Powers

*Whispering in the Giant’s Ear* is a documentation of one man’s experience working with Bolivian indigenous people in an attempt to aid their climb out of the oppressive clutches of their own government. Written in the free flowing, edge-of-your-seat style of a fictional novel, this very true account of William Powers’ escapades in Bolivia exposes the complexities associated with how indigenous people struggle to create a new identity in the presence of the runaway train of globalization.

Powers begins his story with his starting to work with a small, Bolivian NGO called FAN. His experience with larger corporate NGO’s gave him insight into the corruption and greed of these organizations, so he decided to take the much less glamorous job opportunity. Powers operates closely with a Bolivian chief, Salvador, whose main goal is to establish “a permanent, indivisible Indian Territory for their children and children’s children” after years of exploitation and internal colonization. Powers is specifically working with FAN on a Kyoto experiment, securing the forest for indigenous people, so to combat the harmful effects of global climate change, the extinction of indigenous groups, and the oppression and severe poverty which plague the country. Through a series of re-evaluations of issues, roadblock protests by the indigenous people, and struggles with fund distributions, the story ends with the stepping down of Bolivia’s president and elections in the near future; hope for an Indian democracy is on the horizon. Additionally, given this news, wealthy corporations continue to fund Amazon protection projects so the lush landscape of Bolivia will hopefully be preserved along with its people.

The evolution of Bolivia’s war on globalization is mirrored in Powers’ own lifestyle choices and mindset. He begins his story in a posh penthouse with all the amenities of an ideal first-world abode. However, by the time Bolivia’s oppressive president stepped down and Bolivian’s were finally given a chance to take their government back, the extent to Powers’ luxury was bathing in the river and chewing coca leaves with his Chiquitano comrades. By documenting his personal shifts, Powers nudges the reader to re-evaluate his or her own potentially extravagant lifestyle and realize how he or she is contributing to the ugly aspects of globalization. In one very powerful introspection-inducing part, Powers meets an American family who had decided to live off the grid in Bolivia, surviving solely off the fruits of the forest. The blonde, dreadlocked father of the family, named Christopher Columbus, spoke to Powers about how he believed so many indigenous people had “sold out” and were now simply just “apples”: “red on the outside, white on the inside.” Christopher Columbus thought the indigenous people could revert to living “uncorrupted,” but Powers discusses with the readers how, for indigenous people like Salvador, it was not that easy; they had to choose between “extinction and an imperfect survival,” whereas Christopher Columbus could always go running back to America with his ever-ready passport if too many complications arose.

This book, though racked with interesting characters and dramatic events, had some consistent prevailing themes which really made an impact on me. Essentially, the book recognizes that creating a better standard of living and combatting environmental problems cannot be solved as cleanly cut as it would seem on paper. People in the throws of poverty are first and foremost concerned with survival by any means necessary, so this often means taking less-than-eco-friendly means to do so. Powers wants those of us in first-world countries to understand that perspective is everything and that, although the environment and cultures can be preserved collectively, it will have to be done from the local level, through the eyes of the indigenous people.